I can never let you go

—"I hope this wasn't the end

I'm still by your side, I think this is right."

William

I woke to the particular light that only exists in this house. Not the sharp, clinical brightness of my old apartment—that glass tower where I'd hidden for three years, where the walls reflected everything and absorbed nothing. This light was different. Softer. Filtered through curtains my mother had chosen decades ago, landing on wooden floors that held the memory of every footstep that had ever crossed them.

This was home.

I lay still for a moment, letting the reality of it settle into my bones. The ceiling above me was the same ceiling I'd stared at as a child, during thunderstorms when I'd been too afraid to sleep, during lazy summer afternoons when time seemed infinite. The same ceiling, now freshly painted, the water damage repaired, but still carrying the echo of who I used to be.

Beside me, Est shifted in his sleep. His hair was longer than it had been a year ago—he was growing it out, he'd said, wanted to try something different. It fell across his forehead now, dark strands catching the morning light. His face was peaceful in sleep, the particular softness that I'd memorized during a thousand mornings just like this one.

A year.

It had been a year since he'd come home from the tour. A year since he'd stood in that airport arrivals hall, running toward me, making a scene that I still thought about when I needed to smile. A year since I'd slipped that bracelet onto his wrist and asked him to be mine officially, completely, forever.

Forever was working out pretty well so far.

I reached out and brushed a strand of hair from his face, careful not to wake him. He needed the sleep—he'd been working late all week, editing photos from his latest project, preparing for the exhibition that would open next month. His fourth exhibition in a year. His career had exploded since the tour, and I was so proud of him that sometimes I couldn't find words for it. But I was also selfish. I wanted these quiet moments for myself—the ones where he was here, present, mine in the simplest and most profound way.

"Stop watching me sleep," he mumbled, eyes still closed. "It's still creepy."

"It's still romantic."

"Both." He opened one eye. "What time is it?"

"Early. We have time."

"Time for what?"

I kissed him instead of answering. Soft and slow, the kind of kiss that had no agenda beyond itself. He responded with the particular warmth that came from a year of learning each other, of knowing exactly how to move, how to breathe, how to exist together.

"Good morning." I said, when we finally separated.

"Good morning." He smiled, still half-asleep, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. "I love waking up here."

"Here specifically?"

"This house. This bed. With you." He stretched, the movement casual and domestic in a way that still amazed me. "A year ago, I never could have imagined this."

"A year ago, I couldn't imagine leaving my apartment."

"Look at us. Being functional adults with a shared home and everything."

"We're crushing it."

He laughed—that bright, warm sound that I would never tire of hearing—and pulled me close.

"We really are," he said. "We really, really are."

The house was different now. Not unrecognizably different—I'd been careful about that, had spent months making decisions that honored my mother's vision while also creating space for something new. But different in the ways that mattered. Alive in the ways it hadn't been when I'd first received the keys, standing in the overgrown garden with Est beside me, wondering if I had the strength to reclaim what I'd lost. I walked through the rooms now, in the quiet hour before Est woke properly, letting myself feel the particular weight of what we'd built.

The kitchen was my favorite.

My mother's original tiles remained—the hand-painted ones my grandmother had created, now cleaned and restored to their original beauty. But the appliances were new, chosen by Lego with his particular mix of aesthetic sensibility and practical wisdom. The counters were different too, a warm butcher block that invited touch, that said use me, live in me, make this space your own.

The refrigerator door was covered in photographs. So many photographs. Photo booth strips from various outings—me and Est, our faces pressed together, making expressions that would have been unthinkable for the old William. Group shots from dinners and parties and the ordinary moments that had somehow become extraordinary. Pictures of Lego's dance performances, captured by Hong with his increasingly impressive eye. Images from Est's exhibitions, from Tui's new studio opening, from all the milestones we'd accumulated over the past year.

And pictures of my mother. I'd framed several and placed them throughout the house, but I also kept some here, on the refrigerator, where I'd see them every day. Her laughing at something off-camera. Her standing in the garden, surrounded by the flowers she'd loved. Her holding baby me, looking at me with an expression of such profound love that it still made my chest ache to see it.

She was here, in this house. Not in any supernatural sense—I didn't believe in ghosts, not really—but in the way that love leaves its mark on spaces. In the way that the walls remembered her voice, the floors remembered her footsteps, the garden remembered her care. And in doing so, I'd finally found my own way back.

There was a newer photograph on the refrigerator, one I'd added just last month.

My half-sister. She was five months old now, born to my father and his wife in the autumn. I'd met her three times—awkward visits to their home, carefully negotiated through therapists and the particular bureaucracy of estranged family relations.

I didn't know what to feel about her, if I was being honest. She was innocent—a baby, completely separate from the complicated history between me and my father. And she was beautiful, with dark eyes that reminded me of photographs of myself at that age. But she was also a reminder. Of the family my father had chosen to build when he couldn't handle the one he already had. Of the speed with which he'd moved on after my mother's death, remarrying, starting over, leaving me behind in my glass tower to drown in grief alone.

Dr. Chaisri said I was making progress on this. That I could hold multiple truths at once now—that my father had failed me, and that my sister was innocent, and that I could choose what kind of relationship I wanted with her without letting his failures define it.

I wasn't there yet. But I was trying.

For now, her picture stayed on the refrigerator. Evidence that she existed. Possibility of something I wasn't ready to name.

The studio was at the back of the house, in a room that had once been my mother's sunroom. I'd converted it during the renovation, knocking out a wall to expand the space, installing skylights that let in the particular quality of natural light that every painter craved. The walls were now covered with canvases in various stages of completion, with reference photographs and color studies and the general chaos of creation.

This was where I spent most of my days. I settled into my usual chair now, looking at the canvas I'd been working on for the past week. It was different from my earlier work—less chaotic, less violent, less desperate. The colors were softer. The composition more intentional. Evidence, I hoped, of how far I'd come.

The subject was Est.

I'd been painting him for months now—a series of portraits that captured different aspects of who he was. Est with his camera, focused and intent. Est laughing at something I'd said, his whole face transformed by joy. Est sleeping, peaceful in a way that still amazed me. Est looking out a window, his profile limned with golden light.

This particular painting showed him in the garden. He was kneeling among the flowers, photographing something I couldn't see, and I'd captured the moment just before he pressed the shutter—that particular stillness of concentration, the way his whole body aligned toward his subject.

It wasn't finished yet. I was still working on his hands—always the hardest part to get right, the way his fingers curled around the camera, gentle but confident, the way someone might hold something precious.

I'd learned about his hands, over this past year. The particular calluses from his equipment. The way they felt against my skin, mapping me like familiar territory. The way they moved when he was explaining something he cared about, expressive and alive.

I could paint those hands forever and never capture them completely.

But I was trying. Every day, I was trying.

My phone buzzed with a message from Lego.

Lego: GOOD MORNING P'WILL!!!

Lego: What time should we come over tonight???

Lego: P'Tui says 6 but I think 5 is better because then we have more time to hang out before dinner!!!

Lego: Also I'm bringing cookies. The new recipe. Hong says they're too sweet but

Hong is WRONG.

I smiled at the screen, typing a response.

William: 5 is fine. Est is still sleeping.

Lego: STILL??? It's almost 9!!!

William: He was up late editing.

Lego: Ahhhh the exhibition!! I'm so excited!!! Hong says the early reviews are really good!!!

William: They are. He deserves every bit of it.

Lego: He does!!! Everyone's going to see what we've always seen!!!

Lego: Anyway I have to go to class now but I'll see you tonight!!!

Lego: [Image attached]

The image showed Lego in what appeared to be dance gear, making a peace sign at the camera. Behind him, I could see the mirrors of the dance studio, and reflected in them, Hong with his camera raised, clearly the one taking the picture.

Their friendship had deepened over the past year. Lego and Hong had developed a particular bond—perhaps because of Tui, perhaps because of proximity, perhaps simply because they recognized something in each other that needed companionship. They went to salons together. Took photographs of each other. Supported each other's work with the fierce loyalty of people who had chosen to be family.

I was grateful for it. Grateful that Lego had people beyond me and Tui, grateful that Hong had softened enough to let someone bright into his carefully guarded world.

We were all learning, I realized. All of us. Learning to open, learning to trust, learning that the circles we'd built could always expand to include more.

The garden was Lego's masterpiece. I walked through it now, in the growing morning light, marveling at what he'd created over the past year. The wild chaos of my mother's neglected plantings had been transformed into something intentional, something alive, something that bloomed in carefully orchestrated waves of color throughout the seasons.

The roses were his pride—climbing varieties that had finally reached the trellis, creating the arbor my mother had always dreamed of. Beneath them, smaller flowers carpeted the ground, filling every inch of space with texture and fragrance.

The birdbath he'd added stood in the center of it all, already visited by the sparrows that had made this garden their home. I'd watched them throughout the year—building nests, raising young, returning again and again to the space we'd created for them. And the frangipani tree still stood, still bloomed, still carried the weight of everything it represented.

I stopped beneath it now, reaching up to touch one of the low-hanging branches. The bark was rough beneath my fingers, familiar in a way that transcended memory.

"Hi, Mae," I said quietly. "I'm still here. Still trying."

The tree didn't respond, of course. Trees didn't do that. But I liked to think that somewhere, in whatever place the dead occupied, she knew. She saw what I'd done with her garden, her house, her legacy.

I liked to think she was proud.

Est found me there, twenty minutes later. He was still rumpled from sleep, wearing one of my old t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants that hung low on his hips. His hair was a disaster. He was holding two cups of coffee, and he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"You're communing with nature." he observed, handing me a cup.

"I'm communing with memories."

"Same thing, sometimes." He settled beside me on the bench I'd placed beneath the tree, leaning into my shoulder with the ease of long practice. "What time is everyone coming tonight?"

"Five. Lego insisted."

"Of course he did." He smiled into his coffee. "I love our Sundays."

"Me too."

We sat in silence for a while, watching the garden wake up around us. Birds moved through the flowers, collecting breakfast. A butterfly—orange and black, probably a monarch—drifted past, lazy and unconcerned.

"A year ago," Est said eventually, "I was on a plane coming home from the tour."

"I remember."

"I was so scared. Not of seeing you—well, a little scared of that—but of whether everything would still fit. Whether the life I'd left would still have room for me."

"And?"

"And it had more room than I'd imagined." He looked at me, his expression soft. "Not just you. Everything. The friendships, the work, the—all of it. It all expanded while I was gone, instead of shrinking."

"That's what love does, isn't it? It expands."

"When it's healthy."

"When it's healthy," I agreed.

We'd learned that together, over the past year. The difference between consuming love and sustaining love. The way to be together without disappearing into each other. The particular balance of independence and connection that made relationships work.

It wasn't always easy. We'd fought—not often, but sometimes. Had moments of frustration and misunderstanding, of fears that surfaced unexpectedly and required careful navigation. But we'd worked through all of it. Had chosen, again and again, to stay. And here we were. A year later. Still choosing.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too." He kissed my shoulder, a casual gesture that meant everything. "Now come inside. I'm making breakfast."

Est's camera was never far from his hand. Over the past year, he'd documented everything—the renovation of the house, the growth of the garden, the ordinary moments of our life together. He printed his favorites and displayed them throughout the space, covering walls that I'd once imagined holding only my paintings.

I loved it. Loved seeing our life through his eyes. Loved the way he captured moments I would have otherwise forgotten—the two of us cooking dinner, me fallen asleep on the couch with a book, the garden in early morning mist.

"You're obsessive about the printing," I teased him sometimes.

"I'm preserving memories for our old age," he'd respond. "When we're ninety and can't remember what we ate for breakfast, we'll have photographic evidence."

"Evidence of breakfast?"

"Evidence of everything. Every moment that mattered."

He wasn't wrong. The photographs were evidence—of joy, of connection, of a life being built deliberately and with care. They told a story that words couldn't capture, a visual narrative of two people learning to be happy together.

I stopped in front of one of my favorites now, on my way to the kitchen where Est was making breakfast. It showed the two of us at Lego's birthday party six months ago—Est's arm around my shoulders, both of us laughing at something off-camera. Lego had taken the picture, his particular skill for capturing candid moments evident in the way he'd frozen our joy perfectly.

Next to it hung a photograph from Est's exhibition opening—the first major one, three months after his return from the tour. He was standing in front of one of his pieces, talking to a critic, his whole body animated with passion for his work. I'd taken that one myself, learning to use his camera with his patient guidance.

And next to that, a group shot from Christmas. All of us—me and Est, Tui and Lego, Hong and Nut—crowded onto our living room couch, wearing terrible holiday sweaters that Lego had insisted upon, looking like the family we'd somehow become.

I didn't have many photographs from before my isolation. Had destroyed most of them, during the worst of my grief, unable to bear the evidence of happiness that felt unreachable. But now the house was full of them. New memories, built deliberately, chosen and preserved. We were making a life. Frame by frame, moment by moment. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The kitchen smelled like heaven. Est had made his specialty—a Thai-style omelet with herbs and vegetables, served over rice with a spicy dipping sauce that I'd grown to crave. The recipe was his own invention, developed during late nights when he couldn't sleep, perfected over months of experimentation.

"Eat," he commanded, setting a plate in front of me. "You need fuel for hosting duties."

"What hosting duties? Everyone brings their own contributions."

"You have to be present and charming. That requires energy."

"I'm naturally charming."

"You're naturally something. I'm not sure charming is the word."

I threw a napkin at him. He caught it, laughing, and settled into the chair beside me.

We ate in comfortable silence, the morning light streaming through the kitchen windows. Outside, the garden continued its quiet business of existing. Inside, we existed too—together, present, alive.

"I got an email yesterday," Est said eventually. "From the tour management."

My fork paused halfway to my mouth. "And?"

"They want me again. For the next tour. Asia and Europe this time. Six months."

Six months. Half a year. The number landed in my chest like a stone.

"When?"

"Starting in January. If I say yes."

I set down my fork, trying to organize my thoughts. We'd known this might happen—had discussed it, even, when the possibility first emerged months ago. But knowing something might happen and facing the reality of it were different things.

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know." His voice was honest, uncertain. "Part of me wants to go. The experience was incredible—you know that. It changed everything about how I see my work."

"And the other part?"

"The other part doesn't want to leave you. Leave this." He gestured at the kitchen, the house, the life we'd built. "Six months is a long time."

"It is."

"We survived three months last time."

"We did."

"But it was hard."

"It was hard," I agreed. "But we came out stronger."

He was quiet for a moment, staring at his plate.

"I haven't decided yet," he said finally. "They gave me a few weeks to think about it. I just—wanted you to know. To discuss it."

"Thank you for telling me."

"Of course I told you. We make decisions together now. That's how this works."

I reached across the table and took his hand. His fingers interlaced with mine automatically, the gesture as natural as breathing.

"Whatever you decide," I said, "I'll support you. If you want to go, I'll be here when

you come back. If you want to stay, we'll build something else. There's no wrong answer."

"There might be wrong answers."

"There might be. But we'll figure them out together."

He squeezed my hand. "I love you."

"I love you too." I brought his hand to my lips, kissing his knuckles. "Now finish your breakfast. We have a dinner to prepare for."

I hadn't been back to my old apartment since I'd moved out. The sale had gone through four months ago—a quick transaction, the buyer eager to own a piece of prime Bangkok real estate. I'd signed the papers without looking back, transferred the money into accounts I'd use for the house renovation, and closed that chapter of my life completely. But sometimes I still thought about it.

The glass walls that had felt like both protection and prison. The view of the city that I'd memorized during three years of hiding. The particular silence of a space designed for one person who rarely spoke.

I didn't miss it. That was the surprising part. I'd thought I would—thought that three years of hiding would have left some kind of attachment, some gravitational pull back to the place I'd been safe. But when I walked away for the last time, I felt only relief.

The apartment had been a cage. A beautiful, expensive, self-imposed cage. And I'd finally found the strength to open the door.

This house—my mother's house, now our house—was something different. It had history and memory, warmth and presence. It had room for guests, for gatherings, for the particular chaos of a life shared with others.

It had Est.

That first night, when the renovation was finally complete and I'd spent hours just walking through the rooms, touching the walls, feeling the reality of what we'd created—I'd known I couldn't go back to the apartment. Couldn't return to that isolation, that glass-walled solitude, when this alternative existed.

I'd asked Est to move in with me that very night.

He'd cried. We both had, actually—the particular tears that came from joy so overwhelming it needed release. And the next week, he'd packed his small apartment into boxes and brought them here, filling the house with his photographs

and his plants and his particular way of existing.

We'd been here together ever since.

Some nights, I still woke in a panic, certain I was back in the apartment, certain the past year had been a dream and I was still trapped in my glass cage. But then I'd feel Est beside me, hear his breathing, smell the particular scent of the house around us—and I'd remember. This was real. This was home.

I never had to go back.

The afternoon passed in the comfortable rhythm of preparation. Est handled the kitchen—he was better at cooking than me, had learned during his years of independence, and took genuine pleasure in creating meals for people he loved. I watched him move through the space, efficient and focused, occasionally asking questions or offering to help.

"You're hovering," he observed, without looking up from the vegetables he was chopping.

"I'm supervising."

"Same thing." He pointed with the knife. "If you want to be useful, set the table."

I set the table.

The dining room was large enough for our gatherings now—we'd expanded it during the renovation, opening up the space to accommodate the family we'd built. Eight chairs surrounded a table that had belonged to my mother, refinished and restored but still carrying its original character. On the walls hung a mix of my paintings and Est's photographs, the visual evidence of our combined vision.

I laid out plates and cutlery, napkins and glasses, the particular choreography of hosting that I'd learned over the past year. Before the renovation, before Est, I couldn't have imagined doing this—couldn't have imagined wanting people in my space, choosing to fill my home with noise and chaos and love.

Now I looked forward to these Sundays more than almost anything. The chance to gather with people who mattered, to share food and conversation, to remind myself that I wasn't alone anymore.

The doorbell rang at exactly 5 PM.

"That'll be Lego," Est called from the kitchen. "He's always exactly on time."

"Because he's been waiting outside for ten minutes to avoid being early."

"Exactly."

I opened the door to find Lego bouncing on his heels, holding a container of what were presumably the cookies he'd mentioned. Behind him, Tui stood with an expression of fond exasperation that I'd come to recognize as his default state around his boyfriend.

"P'WILL!" Lego launched himself at me for a hug before I could react. "I missed you!"

"You saw me three days ago."

"That's three whole days! That's practically forever!"

Tui met my eyes over Lego's head and shrugged, the universal gesture of what can you do.

"Come in," I said, extricating myself from the embrace. "Est is finishing dinner."

Hong and Nut arrived twenty minutes later, bickering about something that I couldn't quite follow.

"I'm just saying," Hong was arguing as he walked through the door, "that if you're going to commission a piece, you should at least know what aesthetic you want."

"I want your aesthetic. That's why I commissioned you."

"My aesthetic varies depending on the project. You need to give me direction."

"My direction is 'make it Hong-like.'"

"That's not direction! That's an abdication of responsibility!"

"It's trust!"

"It's lazy!"

They stopped arguing long enough to greet everyone, then resumed immediately as they settled onto the living room couch.

I watched them with a kind of wonder. Hong—guarded, prickly Hong—had softened so much over the past year. Not fundamentally changed, not transformed into someone unrecognizable. But opened. Expanded. Let Nut into the carefully protected spaces that he'd kept private for so long.

They were good together. Different in ways that somehow worked, complementary in ways that mattered. Nut's warmth balanced Hong's sharpness. Hong's precision balanced Nut's chaos. They fit.

"How's the new studio?" I asked Tui, while the others settled into conversation.

"Bigger. Better." He smiled slightly. "More exhausting, if I'm honest. But Lego's been helping with the organization, and Hong handles most of the social media now."

"And business is good?"

"Business is excellent. Too excellent, some days. We've had to start a waiting list."

I nodded, genuinely pleased for him. The move had been a risk—leaving the studio he'd built from nothing, the apartment above it that had held so many memories. But it had been the right choice. The new space gave him room to grow, to expand, to build something even bigger than what he'd had before.

"Lego seems happy." I observed.

"Lego is always happy." But Tui's voice was soft, proud. "He's thriving. The new apartment gives him space to breathe. Room for his plushies and his plants and all the chaos he generates."

"And you?"

"Me?" Tui considered the question. "I'm happy too. Terrified, some days—waiting for it to fall apart, for something to go wrong. But learning to trust that it won't."

"I understand that feeling."

"I know you do."

We shared a look—the particular understanding of two people who had both learned, slowly and painfully, that good things could last.

Dinner was a production.

Est had made pad thai and tom kha gai, both of them perfect, both of them filling the house with scents that made my mouth water. Lego's cookies were dessert, arranged on a plate with the particular care he brought to everything aesthetic. There was wine and beer and the sweet concoction that had become our group's signature drink—Lego's invention, refined over months of experimentation.

We ate around the big table, conversation flowing easily, laughter punctuating the gaps between stories. Hong complained about clients who didn't understand his vision. Nut shared gossip from work—the rumors about nepotism that he handled with remarkable grace, refusing to let others' jealousy diminish his accomplishments. Lego talked about his upcoming performance, the choreography he was developing with his dance troupe. Tui described the most challenging tattoo he'd done that week—a memorial piece for a grieving widow, intricate and

heartbreaking.

And Est talked about the exhibition.

"The early responses have been good," he said, when Hong asked. "The critics seem to—get it, I guess? What I was trying to do."

"What were you trying to do?" Nut asked.

"Show moments. Not just photograph them, but—" He struggled for words. "Preserve them. The tour photos, the travel stuff—they're evidence of life happening. Of joy and connection and all the things people miss when they're not paying attention."

"Very philosophical," Hong said, but his tone was approving.

"Hong's been stealing my techniques," Lego added. "For his own photography."

"I have not been stealing. I've been adapting."

"Same thing."

"It's really not."

I watched them bicker, feeling the particular warmth of community. These people—these friends, this family—had become essential to my life over the past year. I couldn't imagine existence without them anymore.

"William's been painting me," Est announced, changing the subject. "An entire series."

"Really?" Lego's eyes lit up. "Can we see?"

"They're not finished." I said quickly.

"The best ones never are," Hong said. "Show us."

I led them to the studio, suddenly nervous in a way I hadn't expected. The paintings of Est were arranged chronologically, showing the progression of my work over the past year. From the early attempts—technically competent but somehow missing something—to the later pieces, where I'd finally learned to capture not just his appearance but his essence.

They stood in silence, looking.

"These are incredible," Nut said finally. "William, these are—"

"Extraordinary," Hong finished. "The light work. The way you've captured movement even in stillness. This is some of your best work."

"The best work is about him," I said, nodding toward Est. "He inspires it."

Est's eyes were bright when he looked at me. "You never let me see them. When you were working."

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Consider me surprised." He crossed to the most recent painting—the one of him in the garden, photographing something I couldn't see. "This is how you see me?"

"This is how you are. I just try to capture it."

He kissed me, right there in front of everyone, soft and certain and full of everything we'd built together.

"Get a room." Hong muttered.

"We have many rooms," Est replied. "This house has six bedrooms."

"Why do you need six bedrooms?"

"For guests. For storage. For whatever we want." Est was still looking at me, his expression warm. "We're building a life here. Lives need room to expand."

We ended up in the living room, as we always did, sprawled across furniture with drinks in hand and the particular ease of people who had done this many times before.

Tui and Lego were on the loveseat, tangled together in a way that made it hard to tell where one ended and the other began. Hong and Nut occupied the large couch, sitting close but not quite touching—Hong's way, I'd learned, of showing affection without being obvious about it. Est and I had claimed the armchair, me sitting and him perched on the arm, his hand resting on my shoulder.

"One year," Lego said suddenly. "Can you believe it's been one year?"

"Since what?"

"Since P'Est came home. Since everything—settled. Into what it is now."

I thought about it. A year ago, I'd been standing in that airport arrivals hall, holding flowers, terrified that three months apart had changed everything. A year ago, Est had run to me through the crowd, making a scene that still lived in my memory like a gift.

A year ago, we'd made it official. Boyfriends. Partners. Forever.

"A lot has changed." I said.

"A lot has grown," Est corrected. "Change sounds like things being lost. This is growth. Expansion."

"The studio moved," Tui offered. "Lego moved in with me."

"Hong and I became official," Nut added. "Finally."

"I resent the 'finally,'" Hong said. "I was being deliberate."

"You were being oblivious."

"Deliberate!"

"The house," I said, cutting through their banter. "The house is finished. Est lives here now."

"The garden is thriving," Lego added proudly. "The roses I planted last spring are massive now."

"P'Est had four exhibitions," Hong said. "That's significant growth for an emerging artist."

"P'Will sold his apartment," Est said softly. "Left his tower behind."

The weight of that settled over the group. They knew what it meant—had been there through the years of isolation, had watched me hide and struggle and slowly learn to emerge.

"You've come so far," Lego said, his voice thick. "All of you. All of us."

"We've come so far together," I corrected. "None of this would have happened without—" I gestured at the room, at the people in it. "Without you. All of you. Building something."

"We're very impressive," Hong said dryly. "We should start a support group."

"We ARE a support group," Nut pointed out.

"An informal one."

"The best kind."

They left in stages, the way they always did.

Hong and Nut went first—work in the morning for both of them, the particular constraints of professional lives. They said goodbye with promises to see each other soon, to share updates, to maintain the connections that had become essential.

Tui and Lego lingered longer. They always did, Lego reluctant to leave, Tui patient with his reluctance.

"Same time next week?" Lego asked, hugging me at the door.

"Same time every week. That's how traditions work."

"I know. I just like confirming." He hugged Est too, clinging for an extra moment. "I'm so happy for you both. You know that, right?"

"We know."

"I just want to say it. Out loud. Often."

"You do say it," Tui pointed out, gently extracting him. "Approximately every time we see them."

"Because it's true!"

"We appreciate it," I said. "Truly. Thank you for being here. For being—ours."

Lego's eyes went bright. "P'Will—"

"Go home, Lego. Before you cry and make me cry and then Est has to deal with both of us."

"Too late," Est said. "I can see his bottom lip wobbling."

"I am NOT wobbling—"

Tui steered him gently toward the car, calling goodbye over his shoulder. I watched them go, feeling the particular bittersweetness of endings—even temporary ones, even the kind that would reverse themselves in seven days.

"He really loves us," Est observed, closing the door.

"He loves everyone. That's his superpower."

"It's a good superpower to have."

"The best."

The house was quiet after everyone left. A different kind of quiet than the silence I'd known in my apartment—not empty, but restful. Full of the echo of conversation and laughter, of the particular warmth that came from hosting people you loved. Est and I cleaned up together, moving through the tasks with the efficiency of long practice. Dishes washed and dried. Leftovers stored. Surfaces wiped clean.

"Good night?" I asked, when we'd finished.

"Perfect night." He smiled at me across the kitchen. "I love our Sundays."

"Me too."

We moved to the living room, settling onto the couch in our usual configuration—me sitting, him lying with his head in my lap. I ran my fingers through his hair, the gesture automatic and soothing for both of us.

"About the tour." he said eventually.

"We don't have to decide tonight."

"I know. But I've been thinking about it. All day, really."

"And?"

He was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"I want to go," he said. "Part of me does, at least. The experience was incredible, and this opportunity—Europe, Asia, six months of seeing the world—"

"It's everything you dreamed of."

"It was. It is." He looked up at me, his expression complicated. "But I also have everything I dreamed of here. You. This house. The life we've built."

"Those things will still be here when you come back."

"I know. But six months—"

"Is a long time. But we've done it before."

"Three months. Six is twice that."

"Math was never my strong suit, but I'll take your word for it."

He laughed despite himself. "I'm being serious."

"I know you are. So am I." I stopped stroking his hair long enough to take his hand. "Est, listen to me. I want you here. I always want you here. But I don't want you to stay because you're afraid of what happens if you go. I don't want you to sacrifice your dreams for a relationship—that's not what love is supposed to be."

"What is love supposed to be?"

"Support. Trust. Wanting the other person to grow, even when growth takes them away from you." I squeezed his hand. "I survived three months. I can survive six. We can survive anything, as long as we both keep choosing to come back."

"You really believe that?"

"I really believe that."

He was quiet for a long moment, processing.

"I don't have to decide tonight," he said finally.

"No."

"But I think—" He paused. "I think I'm going to say yes."

"Then say yes."

"You're not upset?"

"I'm proud." I kissed his forehead. "I'm terrified, honestly. Six months without you sounds unbearable. But I'm also proud—of who you've become, of what you're building. I want you to have everything, Est. Everything you've ever dreamed of."

"I already have everything I've ever dreamed of." He looked up at me with an expression that made my heart ache. "You're my dream, William. You and this house and this life. Everything else is just—bonus."

"Then let me be the foundation you come back to. Let me be the home waiting for you at the end of every adventure." I smiled at him. "That's what I want to be. Your home."

"You already are."

We ended up in the garden. It was late—past midnight—but neither of us was ready for sleep. The moon was full, casting silver light across the flowers and trees, transforming the space into something magical. We sat on the bench beneath the frangipani tree, wrapped in a blanket, looking up at stars that were barely visible through Bangkok's light pollution.

"A year ago," I said, "I couldn't have imagined any of this."

"Any of what?"

"This." I gestured at the garden, at the house behind us, at the life we'd built. "You. The house being finished. The friends, the exhibitions, the—everything. A year ago, I was still hiding. Still convinced that connection was impossible for someone as broken as me."

"You were never broken."

"I was. But broken things can be mended. That's what I've learned."

He leaned into me, his warmth familiar and essential.

"What do you think the next year will bring?" he asked.

"I don't know. Your exhibition opening. Maybe the tour. More dinners with friends. More mornings waking up beside you."

"That sounds perfect."

"It sounds like enough."

We sat in silence, letting the night settle around us. The garden was alive with small sounds—insects and birds and the particular rustling that came from things growing.

"I never thanked you," Est said eventually.

"For what?"

"For waiting. When I was on the tour the first time. For trusting that I'd come back."

"I trusted because I loved you. That's all."

"It's not all. It's everything." He turned to look at me, his face silver in the moonlight. "I love you, William. I love the life we're building. I love that you're my home, that I get to come back to you after every adventure, that you'll be here—always—waiting."

"I'll always wait."

"I know. That's what makes it possible. Knowing you're here. Knowing this"—he gestured at the garden, the house, us—"is real and permanent and waiting."

I kissed him then, slow and certain, the way I'd kissed him a thousand times before and would kiss him a thousand times more. He responded with the particular warmth that came from a year of learning each other, of knowing exactly how we fit.

"Come to bed," I said, when we separated.

"In a minute. I want to stay here a little longer."

"Okay."

We stayed. Watched the stars. Listened to the garden. Existed, together, in the particular peace that came from being exactly where we were supposed to be.

In the morning, I would wake up and make breakfast. Est would send an email to the tour management, accepting their offer. We would tell our friends the news, would start planning for six months of distance, would trust that what we'd built was strong enough to survive. In the weeks ahead, Est's exhibition would open. Critics

would praise his work, would recognize him as the emerging talent he'd always been. His career would continue to grow, to expand, to become everything he'd ever dreamed of.

The garden would keep blooming. The house would keep holding us. The friends would keep gathering on Sundays, building memories, strengthening connections. And I would keep painting.

The series of Est portraits would eventually be finished—would eventually be shown, perhaps, in my own exhibition. Evidence of love made visible. Proof that beauty could be captured, even imperfectly, even incompletely.

I didn't know exactly what the future held. Didn't know if Est's tour would change things, if the distance would be harder than we imagined, if challenges we couldn't predict would test what we'd built. But I knew one thing: we would face it together.

That was the promise we'd made a year ago, slipping bracelets onto each other's wrists in my small Bangkok apartment. That was the commitment we renewed every morning, every night, every moment we chose each other over fear.

Together.

Whatever came next.

Always.

The next morning, I returned to my studio. The painting of Est in the garden was waiting for me—still unfinished, still needing the final touches that would bring it fully to life. But looking at it now, in the clear morning light, I saw something I hadn't noticed before.

The figure in the painting was waiting too. Waiting to press the shutter. Waiting to capture the moment. Waiting, with the particular patience of someone who had learned that good things came to those who trusted the process.

I picked up my brush.

I thought about the past year—the growth, the changes, the thousand small moments that had accumulated into something profound. I thought about my mother's garden, finally restored. About the house, finally home. About Est, finally mine. I thought about what we think we want versus what we truly need. About shadows and substance. About hands held out, voices saying let me stay.

And I began to paint.

Not just the figure in the garden. Not just the photographer capturing beauty. But everything else too—the light and the shadow, the absence and the presence, the particular quality of love that remained when everything else fell away.

I painted for hours. For days, maybe. Losing myself in the work the way I always had, but differently now. Not escaping into the canvas, but bringing myself to it. Offering everything I was, everything I'd become, everything I hoped to be.

When I finally stepped back, the painting was finished.

Est in the garden. My garden. Our garden. Surrounded by roses and hydrangeas and the frangipani tree that had witnessed everything. His hands on his camera, his face focused, his whole being aligned toward something beautiful. And behind him, barely visible but definitely present—a figure in the window. Watching. Waiting. Loving.

Me.

I'd painted myself into the picture. Not as the subject, but as the context. The home waiting for him to return. The love that made all his adventures possible.

It was the best thing I'd ever made.

And it was only the beginning.

The garden was beautiful at this hour. I sat on the outdoor sofa—the one Est had chosen, with its weather-resistant cushions and the particular way it faced the frangipani tree—and let myself simply be present. The afternoon light filtered through the leaves, creating patterns on the grass that shifted and changed with every breath of wind. Somewhere in the hydrangeas, a bird was singing something I couldn't identify, its melody rising and falling in a rhythm that seemed both random and intentional.

This garden was not the same as the one from my childhood.

My mother's garden had been wilder, more sprawling, the particular chaos of a woman who planted what she loved without worrying about design principles. She'd put roses next to vegetables, had let the jasmine climb wherever it wanted, had created a space that felt more like a living thing than a designed landscape.

This garden was different. More intentional. The product of Lego's careful planning and my tentative participation, of Est's preferences and the advice from the flower shop. The roses were in their designated beds, the hydrangeas in theirs. The frangipani tree—my birthday tree, the one that had survived three years of neglect—stood in its original position, but everything around it had been reimagined.

Different and beautiful. Not the same, but enough.

I watched a bee navigate between flowers, its path a mystery I couldn't follow. Butterflies—the kind my mother had always tried to attract with specific plantings—drifted through on their way to somewhere else. The birdbath Lego had installed was occupied by two small sparrows, their splashing creating tiny ripples that caught the light.

Evidence of life. Evidence of growth. Evidence of a world that kept moving, kept blooming, kept becoming, regardless of whether I was paying attention.

Inside the house, I could hear the faint sounds of Est working. He was in the office we shared—his desk by the window, mine by the wall—doing something related to the upcoming tour. The six-month tour. The opportunity that was even bigger than his first one, that would take him to more countries and more stages and more of everything he'd always dreamed of.

Six months.

The number sat in my chest like something I couldn't quite swallow.

On the floor of our walk-in closet, the suitcases were waiting to be packed. Est had pulled them out last night, had started organizing things he'd need, had talked excitedly about the itinerary and the equipment he was bringing and all the photographs he was going to take.

I was happy for him. I was. I knew this mattered—knew this was the culmination of everything he'd worked toward, every dream he'd carried since he was a teenager with a borrowed camera. I knew I wasn't the William of the past, the one who would have crumbled at the thought of six months alone. I was better now. More confident. More mature. Less scared.

But still.

Six months was a long time.

I leaned back against the cushions and closed my eyes, letting the sounds of the garden wash over me. The birdsong. The rustle of leaves. The distant hum of the city, muffled by walls and hedges and the particular quiet of a well-designed space.

Much had changed in the past year and a half. The house was finished, fully lived-in now, every room carrying evidence of the life Est and I were building together. My career had stabilized—exhibitions and commissions and the particular recognition that came from actually showing up instead of hiding. My relationship with my father was cautiously improving, marked by occasional visits to see my half-sister and conversations that were careful but genuine.

I'd changed. That was the most significant thing. The person who sat in this garden now was not the same person who had hidden in a glass tower for three years,

afraid of everything, convinced that isolation was the only way to survive.

I was different. Better. More myself.

And still—

Still, the thought of Est leaving made something twist in my chest.

Not fear, exactly. Not the panic that would have consumed me a year ago. Just—sadness. Loneliness. The particular ache of loving someone and knowing they were about to be very far away for a very long time.

I heard a sound.

A knock—or more accurately, a series of knocks, rapid and enthusiastic, against the wooden garden gate. The particular rhythm that I recognized immediately, that had been announcing Lego's presence for as long as I could remember.

I opened my eyes and turned toward the gate.

He was standing at the garden entrance, waving with both hands, his short brown hair catching the afternoon sunlight in a way that made it seem almost golden.

Lego's hair was different now—shorter than it had ever been during our friendship, the long locks he'd worn for years finally cut into something that framed his face differently. He'd done it three months ago, had shown up at my door with his new cut and a determined expression, had said something about "new chapters" and "letting go" that had made me tear up more than I wanted to admit.

But even with the new hair, even with the years that had passed, he was still recognizably Lego. Still bright. Still vibrant. Still the person who had refused to give up on me even when I'd given up on myself.

"P'Will!" He pushed open the gate and bounded through, his energy filling the garden like sunlight. "I could feel you brooding from outside!"

"I wasn't brooding. I was reflecting."

"You were brooding." He closed the gate behind him and crossed to where I sat, dropping a large bag and a suspiciously square one beside the sofa before launching himself at me.

The hug was fierce and immediate—the particular embrace that Lego gave when he knew something was wrong, when he'd somehow sensed through whatever mysterious connection we shared that I needed him. I held on. Let myself hold on, the way I'd learned to do over years of therapy and growth and accepting that needing people wasn't weakness.

"How did you know?" I asked, my voice rougher than I'd intended.

"I always know." He pulled back, settling onto the sofa beside me, his expression shifting from bright to gentle. "You have this particular energy when you're overthinking. It's like a beacon."

"That sounds ominous."

"It's a P'Will beacon. Specifically designed for detection by best friends with highly developed emotional radar."

I laughed despite myself. "Is that a clinical term?"

"It should be. I'd publish a paper about it, but I don't think scientists are ready for my discoveries."

He settled more comfortably onto the sofa, kicking off his shoes and pulling his legs up beneath him. His outfit was quintessentially Lego—a light blue t-shirt with white ribbons on the sleeves, blue jeans, a black belt that matched his bag. The light makeup he wore enhanced rather than concealed, making his features seem sharper and softer at the same time. He looked good. Happy. The particular contentment of someone who had finally found what they were looking for.

"So," he said, settling his head against my shoulder. "Talk to me. What's the brood about?"

"I wasn't—"

"P'Will."

I sighed. "Est is leaving. Six months. The tour."

"I know. We all know. It's very exciting."

"It is exciting. I'm excited for him."

"But?"

"But six months is a long time. And I know it's not as bad as the first tour—there are breaks, concerts in Thailand, we'll be able to see each other. But still—"

"Still, you're scared."

The word landed like something too accurate.

"Not scared exactly," I said. "Just—worried. About how I'll handle it. About whether I'll fall back into old patterns. About—"

"About being alone." Lego finished quietly.

I nodded. Couldn't find words for how precisely he'd understood.

For a moment, we just sat together, watching the garden. The birds continued their songs. The butterflies continued their journeys. The world continued being alive around us.

"Lie down." Lego said finally.

"What?"

"On the sofa. Lie down. Put your head in my lap."

"Lego—"

"Just do it. Trust me."

I hesitated for a moment, then did as he asked. Shifted my position until I was lying along the sofa, my head resting in his lap, my eyes looking up at the pattern of leaves and sky above us. It felt strange at first—childish, somehow, like something we might have done when we were young. But then Lego's fingers found my hair, stroking gently, and the strangeness dissolved into something that felt like safety.

"Your mother used to do this for you," he said softly. "When you were upset. When you'd had a bad day at school. She'd make you lie down on the sofa in the living room and she'd stroke your hair like this and she wouldn't make you talk until you were ready."

The memory hit me like something physical. My mother's hands in my hair. Her particular gentleness. The way she'd somehow always known what I needed, even when I didn't know myself.

"I remember." I said, my voice barely audible.

"I was always jealous of that." Lego's fingers continued their gentle movement. "My parents never—they weren't like that. But your mom, she'd do it for me too sometimes. When I was staying over and I was sad about something. She'd just—hold space. Without judgment. Without trying to fix anything."

"She was good at that."

"She was good at everything." A pause. "I miss her."

"Me too."

We sat in silence for a while, Lego's fingers in my hair, the garden settling around us like a benediction. I let myself feel the particular comfort of this—of being cared for without conditions, of having someone who understood me deeply enough to know what I needed.

"Do you remember," I said eventually, "when we first met?"

"Art class. Your mother's idea."

"I was so angry about having to go. I thought it would be full of annoying kids who couldn't draw and teachers who would try to 'bring out my potential.'"

"And then you saw me."

"And then I saw you. Sitting in the corner with your colored pencils, drawing something incredibly detailed while everyone else was still figuring out how to hold their brushes properly."

Lego laughed softly. "I was drawing a dragon. A very elaborate dragon. I'd seen a picture in a book and I was trying to replicate it exactly."

"It was incredible. I'd never seen another kid draw like that."

"And you walked over—this angry, scowling boy who clearly didn't want to be there—and you said, 'That's wrong. Dragons don't have six legs.'"

"You said, 'This one does. It's my dragon. I can give it as many legs as I want.'"

"And you said, 'That's not how art works.'"

"And you said—"

"'That's exactly how art works.'"

We both laughed, the memory settling between us like something precious. That had been the beginning—the first conversation of a friendship that had lasted over fifteen years now. Through my mother's illness and death. Through Lego's parents' abandonment. Through my breakdown and isolation and slow, painful recovery.

Through everything.

"You know what I remember most about your mother's garden?" Lego asked, his voice thoughtful now.

"What?"

"The way it always felt safe. No matter what was happening in the rest of the world, no matter how bad things were at my house or at school—when I was in this garden, everything felt okay. Like the plants themselves were protecting us."

I looked around at the garden we'd rebuilt. Different plants now, different arrangements. But the same feeling of safety. The same sense that this space was somehow separate from the chaos of the world.

"That's what I tried to recreate," I admitted. "When we were doing the renovation. I couldn't remember exactly what her garden looked like—I wasn't paying attention

back then, didn't know the names of anything—but I remembered how it felt. And I wanted—I wanted that feeling to still exist. Even though she's gone."

"You did it." Lego's voice was certain. "This place feels exactly like I remember. Different plants, same magic."

"You did most of the work."

"I did the gardening. You did the—" He paused, searching for words. "The intention. The love. I just translated it into flowers."

We stayed like that for a long time, Lego's fingers gentle in my hair, the afternoon light shifting slowly across the garden.

"Tell me about school," I said eventually. "What were you thinking about, when we were young?"

"You mean back when we first became friends?"

"And after. During all those years at my mother's house. What was going on inside your head?"

Lego was quiet for a moment, considering.

"Mostly I was thinking about how to make you laugh," he said finally. "You were always so serious. Even as a kid, you had this—intensity. Like you were carrying something heavy all the time. I wanted to make it lighter."

"You did."

"And I was thinking about survival." His voice shifted, carrying something more complicated. "My parents—you know how they were. Fighting all the time, dragging me into their arguments, treating me like a burden they kept fighting over who had to carry. Being at your house, in this garden—it was an escape. The only place I felt like I could breathe."

"I didn't know it was that bad."

"I didn't tell you. I didn't want to—I don't know. I didn't want to ruin the magic by bringing my problems into it." He paused. "Your mother knew, though. I think she always knew. That's why she always welcomed me, always made sure I had a place here. She was saving me, even though I never asked her to."

My eyes burned with tears I didn't try to hide.

"She loved you," I said. "As much as she loved me. Maybe more, sometimes. You were easier to love."

"That's not true."

"It is. I was difficult. Moody and withdrawn and always lost in my own head. But you—you were bright. Warm. You made her laugh."

"She made me laugh too." Lego's voice was rough now. "She's the reason I know how to cook. The reason I know about flowers. The reason I know how to take care of people." He paused. "She taught me everything my parents never bothered to teach me. How to be a person. How to be kind."

"She would have been so proud of you. Of who you've become."

"She'd be proud of both of us." His fingers stilled in my hair. "Look at us, P'Will. Look at what we survived. Look at what we became anyway."

I looked up at him—at this person who had been my best friend for more than half my life. Who had shown up every Wednesday for three years when I couldn't leave my apartment. Who had refused to let me disappear, even when I was trying so hard to vanish.

"I don't say it enough," I said. "How much you mean to me. How much you've always meant."

"You don't have to say it. I know."

"But I want to say it. I want you to hear it." I reached up and took his hand, the one that had been in my hair. "You're my best friend. You always have been. Through everything—through my mother's death and my breakdown and all the years I was hiding—you never left. You never gave up."

"I never would."

"I know. That's what makes it matter so much." I squeezed his hand. "I love you, Lego. Not the way I love Est—differently. But just as much. You're my family. My real family. The person who chose me when they didn't have to."

Lego's eyes were bright with tears he wasn't hiding.

"I chose you the first day I met you," he said. "The angry boy who told me my dragon was wrong. I looked at you and I thought—'This one. This one I'm going to keep.'"

"That's a strange thing to think about another ten-year-old."

"I was a strange ten-year-old." He laughed, wiping his eyes with his free hand. "But I was right. I kept you. And you kept me."

"Always."

"Always." He squeezed my hand back. "That's the promise, P'Will. No matter what happens—no matter who we're with or where we live or what our lives become—

we're always going to be this. Best friends. Family. Each other's person."

"Even when Est takes me away for six months at a time?"

"Even then." He smiled. "I'll just send you more photos of the garden. And detailed reports about everything that happens while you're gone. And probably too many voice messages complaining about P'Tui's inability to properly appreciate my cooking."

"Does Tui not appreciate your cooking?"

"He appreciates it too quickly. He eats everything before I can even sit down. It's very romantic but also slightly annoying."

I laughed—a real laugh, the kind that came from somewhere deep, that pushed the heaviness out of my chest and replaced it with something lighter.

"There it is," Lego said, satisfied. "There's the laugh I was looking for."

"You always know how to make me laugh."

"It's a gift. Also a skill. Also just knowing you really, really well." He shifted slightly, settling more comfortably. "So. Six months. Tell me what you're actually worried about."

I took a breath, letting myself articulate the things I'd been avoiding.

"I'm worried I'll fall back into old patterns," I said. "That without Est here, without the routine we've built, I'll start isolating again. Hiding. Forgetting how to be a person in the world."

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

"I know you." Lego's voice was firm. "The person you are now—he's not the same person who hid in that apartment. That person was sick, P'Will. He was drowning. But you—you've done the work. You've built the skills. You know how to ask for help now. You know how to reach out when things get hard."

"Knowing how and actually doing it are different things."

"Then we make a plan." He was sitting up now, his expression thoughtful. "What does Dr. Chaisri say? About the six months?"

"He says it's a test. A good test. A chance to prove to myself that I can function independently, that my well-being doesn't depend entirely on Est's presence."

"That sounds right."

"But it's also scary. What if I fail the test? What if I prove that I can't function independently? What if—"

"What if the sky falls and the earth opens up and everything terrible happens all at once?" Lego's voice was gentle but pointed. "P'Will. You're catastrophizing. You know this. You're taking a scary situation and imagining the worst possible outcomes."

"Because the worst possible outcomes feel more realistic than the good ones."

"That's the anxiety talking. Not the truth." He took my hand again. "Here's what I know. In the past two years, you've done things you never thought you could. You gave a speech in front of hundreds of people. You sold your apartment and moved into this house. You started a relationship with someone who sees all of you and loves you anyway. You rebuilt connections with your father. You became part of our family—me and P'Tui and Hong and Nut and everyone."

"I know."

"You know intellectually. But you need to feel it too." He squeezed my hand. "You're not alone anymore, P'Will. Even when Est is gone. You have us. You have this house and this garden and everything you've built. You have therapy and skills and strategies. You have—"

"You."

"You have me." His voice softened. "Always. No matter what. When things get hard, you call me. When you feel yourself slipping, you reach out. That's the deal. That's what best friends do."

"And if I forget? If I start hiding and don't realize I'm doing it?"

"Then I'll notice. I'll show up here with food and opinions and refuse to leave until you talk to me." He smiled. "I have a lot of practice with that, if you recall."

I did recall. The years of Wednesday visits. The way Lego had kept appearing no matter how many times I tried to push him away.

"You're right," I said finally. "I'm catastrophizing. I'm letting fear run the show instead of looking at the evidence."

"That's the therapy talking. See? You do know the skills."

"Knowing and feeling are different."

"Then we work on the feeling part." He stood, pulling me up with him. "Come on. Let's go inside. I'll make tea. You'll take a breath. And we'll make an actual plan for the six months—who you'll see, what you'll do, how you'll stay connected to everything that matters."

"You're very bossy."

"I've always been bossy. You just used to fight me more."

"I've learned that fighting you is useless."

"The wisdom of age." He grinned, picking up his bags from beside the sofa. "Also, I have something to show you. But tea first. And maybe some fruit. When did you last eat?"

"I had breakfast."

"It's 4 PM."

"...I was reflecting."

"You were brooding and starving. Come on. Inside."

The kitchen felt different with Lego in it. Not worse or better—just more alive. More full of the particular energy he brought to every space he occupied. He moved through my kitchen like he belonged there, finding the kettle and the tea and the cutting board without needing to ask where anything was.

"You've rearranged," he observed, pulling mugs from a cabinet. "The tea used to be in the left cupboard."

"Est has opinions about kitchen organization."

"Strong opinions?"

"Very strong. There was a diagram involved."

Lego laughed, the sound bright in the afternoon quiet. "That sounds exactly like P'Est. Very organized chaos."

"It's actually very organized organization. That's what makes it strange."

The water boiled. Lego poured it over tea leaves, the particular fragrance filling the kitchen with warmth and comfort. He'd brought the tea himself, I realized—had pulled it from one of his bags, the expensive kind that he saved for special occasions.

"This is the good tea." I said.

"This is the 'my best friend is having complicated feelings and needs comfort' tea. Different category entirely."

While the tea steeped, Lego found a knife and a cutting board and began preparing fruit. He'd brought that too, apparently—a mango and some star fruit and

something else I couldn't identify.

"Rambutan," he said, seeing my confusion. "P'Tui's been on a tropical fruit kick. He keeps buying things I've never seen before and expecting me to know what to do with them."

"Do you know what to do with them?"

"I look it up. I'm very resourceful." He began peeling the rambutan with practiced efficiency. "Speaking of P'Tui—he says hello. And that you should come to the studio this week. Hong has a new design he wants to show you."

"Is this the one with the botanical illustrations?"

"The one with the very detailed botanical illustrations that are definitely not secretly portraits of specific people in our friend group."

"That sounds like something Hong would do."

"It's exactly something Hong would do. I'm approximately eighty percent sure one of the flowers is supposed to be me."

We heard footsteps on the stairs—Est descending from the office, probably drawn by the sounds of conversation and the smell of tea. He appeared in the kitchen doorway, his expression shifting from focused to warm when he saw Lego.

"You're here," Est said, crossing to give Lego a quick hug. "I thought I heard voices."

"I came to check on P'Will. He was brooding in the garden."

"Reflecting." I corrected automatically.

"Brooding." Lego handed Est a cup of tea. "Also possibly starving. When did he last eat?"

"Breakfast," Est admitted. "We got distracted with tour planning."

"You're both disasters. Sit down. Eat fruit."

We sat. We ate fruit. The kitchen filled with the particular energy of people who loved each other existing in the same space.

"How's the packing going?" Lego asked, directing the question at Est.

"Slowly. I keep second-guessing what I'll need. Last time I overpacked and ended up buying more bags just to carry presents."

"You did buy a suspicious amount of presents."

"Everyone liked their presents!"

"I'm not complaining. I'm just saying—maybe start with fewer bags this time and plan for acquisition space."

Est considered this with the seriousness he brought to all logistical challenges. "That's actually very smart."

"I have my moments."

I watched them—my boyfriend and my best friend, talking about suitcases and strategy, their ease with each other a product of the months and years of becoming family. There had been tension at first, I remembered. Lego had been protective of me; Est had been wary of that protection. They'd circled each other like uncertain animals, trying to figure out where they fit.

Now they were this. Easy. Comfortable. Teasing each other about packing strategies while sharing fruit in my kitchen.

This was what we'd built. This was what I had, even when Est was gone.

"The tour has breaks," Est was saying. "Three of them, actually. The longest is two weeks—I'll come home then. And there are two concerts in Thailand, so you'll be able to come to those."

"I already have the dates saved," Lego confirmed. "We're all going. The whole group. We bought tickets the day they went on sale."

"You didn't have to—"

"Of course we had to. It's your tour. We're supporting you."

I felt something ease in my chest. The reminder that I wouldn't be alone. That even during the longest stretches of Est's absence, I would have people—Lego and Tui, Hong and Nut, everyone who had become part of our strange extended family.

"We'll FaceTime every day," Est said, looking at me now. "Just like last time. I'll send you pictures of everything. You'll send me pictures of the garden. It'll be like I'm barely gone."

"Six months is a long time."

"But we've done it before. And we were newer then. Less established. Less—" He reached across the table and took my hand. "Less certain of each other. We know now. We know this works."

"I know," I said. "I'm just—"

"Processing. I know." He squeezed my hand. "We have two weeks before I leave. Two weeks to make a plan, to set up systems, to make sure everything is in place. And Dr. Chaisri will be here. And Lego will be here. And everyone else. You're not

doing this alone."

"That's what I keep telling him." Lego said.

"Because it's true."

I looked at them—at Est, who was leaving to chase his dreams, and Lego, who was staying to hold down the fort. At the people who loved me, who had chosen me, who weren't going anywhere even when physical distance complicated things.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. We'll make a plan. We'll set up systems. We'll make it work."

"That's the spirit." Lego popped a piece of mango into his mouth. "Now. I have something to show you both. But you have to promise not to freak out."

I exchanged a glance with Est.

"That's a concerning preamble." Est observed.

"It's an exciting preamble. Very different."

"In my experience, those are often the same thing."

"You have limited experience. I'm very experienced. Trust me—this is exciting."

We relocated to the living room, Lego insisting that the reveal required "proper seating and appropriate lighting." He'd brought the suspicious square bag with him—the one he'd been carrying alongside his regular bag, the one he'd been strangely protective of all afternoon. Now he set it on the coffee table with exaggerated care, his expression caught somewhere between excitement and nervousness.

"Before I show you," he said, "I need you both to know that this decision was made with a lot of thought. And research. And consultation with—actually, no. Not consultation. But I did research. A lot of research."

"You're stalling." I observed.

"I'm setting context! Context is important!"

"Just show us." Est said, leaning forward with the particular attention he brought to anything mysterious.

Lego took a breath. Then he unzipped the side of the bag, revealing it to be not a bag at all, but a carrier.

And from inside the carrier came a sound.

Mew.

I blinked.

Mew.

Est's eyes went wide.

Lego reached into the carrier and carefully, gently, extracted a kitten. It was small—tiny, really, probably no more than a few months old. Orange fur that seemed to glow in the afternoon light. Big green eyes that looked at us with the particular confusion of a creature who had been napping and was now suddenly in an unfamiliar living room.

"This," Lego announced, holding the kitten with the particular care of someone handling something precious, "is Mango."

The kitten—Mango—let out another mew, this one more curious than confused. Its tiny tail twitched. Its whiskers caught the light.

It was, objectively, one of the cutest things I had ever seen.

"Lego," I said slowly. "That's a kitten."

"I'm aware."

"A very small kitten."

"Kittens tend to be small. That's their primary characteristic."

"Where did you get a kitten?"

"The shelter. A friend of a friend who volunteers there told me about her. She was found alone under a car about two months ago. Nobody knows what happened to her mother." Lego was cradling Mango against his chest now, and the kitten was responding by kneading at his shirt and purring loudly. "She's been in foster care but she needed a permanent home and I saw her picture and I just—I knew."

"You knew." Est repeated.

"I knew she was mine. My kitten. My Mango."

I looked at Est. Est looked at me. Our eyes communicated volumes.

Did you know about this?

Absolutely not.

Is this really happening?

It appears to be.

"Lego," I said carefully. "Does Tui know about this?"

The silence that followed was extremely eloquent.

"Lego."

"I was going to tell him!" Lego's voice pitched higher with defensive energy. "I have a plan! A very good plan! That involves introducing him to Mango in a controlled setting with snacks and emotional music playing softly in the background—"

"You adopted a kitten without telling your boyfriend?"

"It's not like I adopted a secret child! It's a kitten! A tiny, beautiful, perfect kitten who needed a home!"

"Tui doesn't know you have a cat."

"Technically, I don't have a cat. I have a kitten. Very different vibes. Much smaller. Much easier to hide until—"

"You're planning to hide the kitten?"

"Not hide! Just—gradually introduce! There will be phases!"

Mango, apparently sensing the tension, chose this moment to display her most potent weapon. She rolled over in Lego's arms, showing her fluffy orange belly, and began pawing at the air with tiny paws. Her eyes—those enormous green eyes—blinked up at us with pure, devastating innocence.

Mew?

"Oh no," Est said weakly. "It's cute. It's dangerously cute."

"I know." Lego's voice was triumphant. "That's the strategy. Nobody can be mad at this face. Not even P'Tui. I'm going to introduce them very carefully and by the end he'll be as obsessed with her as I am."

"And if he's not?"

"Then I'll—" Lego paused. "I didn't actually plan for that outcome."

"Because you assumed cuteness would override all objections?"

"Cuteness has worked for me so far!"

I couldn't help it. I started laughing.

The situation was absurd—completely, utterly absurd. Lego, who had shown up to comfort me, had been secretly carrying an adopted kitten the entire time. A kitten he had not mentioned to his live-in boyfriend. A kitten named Mango who was currently purring loud enough to be heard across the room.

"Let me hold her." Est said, reaching out.

"Be gentle. She's very small."

"I know how to hold a kitten."

"Do you? Have you held many kittens?"

"I've photographed kittens. Professionally."

"That's not the same thing at all."

But Lego transferred Mango carefully into Est's arms, and Est's expression immediately transformed into something soft and wonder-filled.

"Oh," he said quietly. "Oh, she's warm. And soft. And—"

Mew.

"—and she's looking at me like she trusts me. Why does she trust me? She just met me."

"Kittens are very trusting. That's another of their characteristics."

I watched my boyfriend hold a kitten while my best friend supervised with the intensity of a new parent, and I felt something shift in my chest.

Not worry. Not fear. Something lighter.

Joy, maybe. The particular joy of realizing that life was ridiculous and beautiful and completely unpredictable, and that no matter what happened—no matter how many months Est was away, no matter what challenges arose—there would always be moments like this. Absurd moments. Wonderful moments. Moments that reminded me why I'd chosen to keep living.

"Tui is going to kill you." I said.

"Tui is going to love her," Lego countered. "Eventually. After a brief period of being overwhelmed by her perfection."

"You're very confident."

"I'm very right." Lego looked at Mango, who was now falling asleep in Est's arms. "Also, I may have already sent him a picture from outside your gate. Just to—prepare him."

"What did he say?"

"He said, and I quote, 'Lego. What is that.'"

"Not great."

"But not a 'no'! Not a 'return it immediately'! Just a question! A question that I'm going to answer very carefully with a lot of context about rescue animals and the importance of giving love and also maybe some of those cookies he likes—"

"You're going to bribe your boyfriend into accepting your surprise kitten?"

"I'm going to persuade him through a combination of emotional appeal and strategic baked goods. Very different."

Est looked up from Mango, his expression helpless.

"William," he said. "I think I want a kitten."

"No."

"But look at her—"

"We are not getting a kitten two weeks before you leave for six months."

"But she's so—"

Mew.

"—she's so small and warm and she trusts me—"

"Est."

"Fine." He sighed. "But when I get back. We're discussing this."

"We can discuss it."

"That's basically a yes."

"That's a discussion. Very different."

Lego was grinning now, his anxiety about Tui's reaction apparently forgotten in the face of his successful kitten introduction.

"You see?" he said. "Mango brings people together. She's a gift. A small, orange, purring gift."

"She's trouble in a fur coat."

"Trouble is just adventure in disguise."

"That's not—"

But I was laughing again, and Est was laughing, and Mango was purring, and somewhere Tui was probably staring at his phone trying to figure out how his life

had acquired a kitten without his input.

This was my life. This was what I'd built. Chaos and love and surprise kittens and friends who showed up when I needed them. It was perfect. It was ridiculous. It was everything I'd ever wanted without knowing how to want it.

They stayed for dinner.

Lego cooked—something elaborate and delicious that he insisted on preparing while Est and I sat at the kitchen table playing with Mango, who had decided that she owned this house and was merely allowing us to inhabit it.

Tui arrived around seven, summoned by a series of increasingly frantic texts from Lego that I could only imagine. He came through the front door with an expression of determined resignation, took one look at Mango purring in Est's lap, and sighed.

"She's already named, isn't she?"

"Mango." Lego confirmed.

"Because of the color."

"And because I like mangoes."

"Of course you do." But Tui was crossing to where Est sat, his expression softening as he looked at the kitten. "She is... very small."

"She's perfect."

"She's orange."

"Orange is perfect."

"You're impossible."

"You love me."

Tui looked at Lego—really looked, with the particular expression I'd come to recognize as his 'I'm surrendering to your chaos' face.

"I do love you," he said. "Fine. We have a cat now."

"KITTEN!"

"We have a kitten now."

Lego launched himself at Tui with the force of someone who had been holding in anxiety for hours, and they stood in my kitchen, embracing, while a small orange kitten purred contentedly in my boyfriend's arms.

"This is not how I expected this afternoon to go." I observed.

"Life rarely goes as expected," Est replied. "That's what makes it interesting."

"Interesting is one word for it."

"Adventure is another."

We ate dinner together—the four of us and one very small kitten who insisted on supervising everything from whatever lap was available. The conversation ranged from the upcoming tour to Tui's new studio projects to Lego's dance showcase preparations to the logistics of introducing a kitten to a household that had not previously contained pets.

And beneath it all, running like a current through everything, was love.

Love for Est, who was chasing his dreams and trusting that our relationship could survive the distance. Love for Lego, who had been there through everything and always would be. Love for Tui, who had become family through his devotion to my best friend. Love for this house, this garden, this life I'd somehow managed to build.

After dinner, we moved to the living room. Mango fell asleep in a patch of sunlight on the carpet. Lego and Tui curled together on one sofa; Est and I on the other.

"You okay?" Est asked quietly, his arm around my shoulders.

"Better than okay."

"The worry?"

"Still there. But quieter." I looked around the room—at the evidence of love, at the people who had chosen to be here. "I think I'll be okay. While you're gone. I think—I know I will be."

"You will be."

"And you'll call every day."

"Every day. Sometimes twice."

"And you'll send pictures."

"So many pictures you'll get tired of them."

"Never." I leaned into him. "I'll never get tired of anything from you."

Outside, the sun was setting over my mother's garden. The frangipani tree cast long shadows across the grass. The birdbath sat empty now, its occupants having departed for wherever birds went at night.

Tomorrow, the packing would begin in earnest. In two weeks, Est would leave. For six months, I would be here without him, learning to be okay on my own. But not really on my own. Never really on my own.

Because Lego would be here. And Tui. And everyone else. Because I had a house full of evidence that I was loved. Because I had a garden that proved things could grow and change and bloom, season after season, year after year.

Because I had everything I needed.

And somewhere, I was sure, my mother was smiling.

Mew.

I looked down. Mango had woken from her nap and was staring at me with those enormous green eyes.

"No," I said. "We're not getting a kitten."

Mew.

"I mean it."

The kitten blinked slowly, the particular blink that cats used to communicate trust.

"...we'll discuss it when Est gets back."